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SUSHIL SARKAR

PAINTINGS

INTRODUCTION BY

M. S. RANDHAWA

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DHOOMI MAL DHARAM DAS

DELHI NEW DELHI

State Museum,
LUCKNOW.

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To

SARADA UKIL,

MY MASTER

SUSHIL SARKAR

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SUSHIL SARKAR

I do not know when Sushil Sarkar was born. In the case of a painter, the date of birth is unnecessary. He is born, on the restless moments, when he first becomes conscious of colour and tries to express himself in colour.

Sushil's childhood and early youth were spent in Anupshahar, that small town in the United Provinces, which contained nothing but the local bazar, rows of dirty houses, a small post office, dusty roads, plenty of blank eyes and haggard faces. The big house where Shshil lived with his parents, abounded in music, and love, and humanity. But in the small beautiful world of that big house, none was there to encourage the boy who was always caricaturing, copying, and flirting with colour. As such, all that Anupshahar could give him, was loneliness, plenty of loneliness. The result was, that the boy became sensitive, introspective and shy. But there were some consoling factors. The banks of the Ganges, the colour of the wheat fields, and the rhythmic motion of the 'Ghagras' of the village women, trained his eyes and mind for perceiving those peculiar arrangements of objects that arouse the creative vision and become material for creative contemplation. So often young Sushil sat on the banks of the river, observing the rhythm of greyish green rolling waves of water, and looking with wonder and admiration at the gorgeous tapestry of orange, yellow, gold, red, scarlet and glowing bronze that lay scattered on the surrounding village fields at dusk and at dawn. The Ganges revealed to him the cosmic significance of rhythm and the villaqe fields introduced to him the mystery of colour. It was these colourful visions of Indian village life, which in his later years his skilful brush quickly transferred to paper to the infinite joy of his admirers.

The drawing-master at the School was kind and encouraging to Sushil. He helped him to draw with a better finish. So the hobby to draw and to paint was gradually becoming a passion, an intense desire to express. Sushil's father who was for long indifferent to his son's activities could not remain detached and discouraging any more. He talked with his son seriously, and it was decided that Sushil should be

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sent abroad for Art training. Sushil was happy. He dreamt of Rome, Athens, Paris, London, of art galleries and art schools, of the many masters who were then enriching European painting. But the father died, and the plans were upset. Sushil was sad, but he accepted the sordidness of the circumstances with a smile.

An artist, very much like a saint or a prophet, is essentially romantic. He accepts the oddities of life, not because they are beautiful in themselves, but that they cannot interfere with his scheme of things which is basically true and beautiful. His acceptance of life is a revolt against life. Life never defeats him, it is he who defeats life; by smiling at the obstructions that life puts in his way, and by laughing at the so-called normal code of conduct he displays his confidence, his faith in himself, and his sincerity to his mission of life.

On his father's death in 1935 Sushil left Anupshahar, and came to live with his brothers in New Delhi. The metropolis, with its dull uniformity and static life was a fit place for docile civil servants but not for a growing artist. There was nothing artistic about New Delhi or the people of New Delhi. For that matter, the whole Northern India was bankrupt so far as aesthetic life was concerned. No one was interested in art, and very few knew about art or artists. But Ukil brothers were there, with their Art School and Art-Gallery. Sushil was fascinated by the great master, Sarada Ukil, and further came to know Ranada Ukil who had just returned from London after painting the walls of India House. On the 7th May, 1935 Sushil joined Ukil's School of Art. He liked the School, the people and the work. It was a privilege to be guided and taught by Sarada Ukil. In New Delhi Sushil did not confine himself to painting or to learn painting only, but seriously devoted his time to the study of aesthetics, history, literature and art. Very often he went to the library of the Archaeological Department of the Government of India and studied Rajput, Kangra, Moghul and Chinese paintings, and the frescoes of Ajanta. Those days were trying for Sushil. He painted, studied, faced the struggle for living, and competed with established artists. Even as an art student he was recognized as a successful painter and won many prizes in the various art exhibitions held in Bombay, Calcutta, Mysore, Delhi, and Simla. Besides, he was maturing under the gentler shades of Sarada Ukil's guidance.

Sarada Ukil influenced him, encouraged him and stimulated him. Sushil adored the Master and his work. Sarada Ukil's calm eyes and sombre face were as beautiful and colourful as Gurudev Tagore's poetry and, his paintings had the depth and vitality of the Upanishads. In him and his works, Sushil saw transparent layers of that spiritual content which has always helped the Indian Artist not to be earth-earthy. At that time, young Indian painters who had been abroad or who were working independently, were either influencedsby impressionism or in trying to be more contemporary picked up loose bits of urrealism. They produced grotesque pictures which had merely a stunt value. It is not on account of any abiding merit, but on account of their oddness that they attracted attention. But not so with Sushil. He relied on Indian traditions, and employed that technique and approach, which is native and well-tried.

During his period of initiation in the realm of Oriental Arts he met with early recognition of his talents. In 1938 he was awarded a first prize for his water colour, "*Spring*", at the annual exhibition of the All-India Fine Arts and Crafts Society. Soon after in 1939 the Simla Fine Art Society awarded him a Prize for his water colour, "*Dargah*", and again in 1940 the Mysore Dushehra Exhibition awarded a prize for his bold landscape, "*The Storm*", and also at the Banaras Art Exhibition and Bombay Society Art Exhibition his works aroused keen interest and admiration and won him awards. In 1941 he exhibited a set of four fine pencil drawings at the All-India Fine Arts and Crafts Exhibition, New Delhi, and was awarded the prize for best set of four paintings. His pencil drawing evoked interest in the Academy of Fine Arts Exhibition, Calcutta and was highly commended. Shri O.C. Gangoly the well-known art critic made special mention of Sushil's pencil drawing while giving a radio talk. This was the beginning of his experiments in pencil drawing.

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In July 1940, Sarada Ukil died. It was a great loss to Indian Art in general, and to Sushil in particular. The Art School was not yet established, and the All-India Fine Arts and Crafts Society was struggling against heavy odds. Sarada Ukil had set the ball rolling, but the indifferent public of New Delhi and Northern India, interested in contracts and money making, was not helpful. The work of the Master, however, had to be carried on and fulfilled. That was the only way to mourn his loss and treasure his memories. So along with Indu Ghosh and Anil Choudhury, Sushil shared the burden of the two institutions. Art students became Art teachers and administrators. Anil Choudhury's hard work and patience have put the All-India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, on sound footing, and Sushil saw that the Art School flourishes, despite limited finances and little encouragement. For Sushil, hard work at home and hard work at School were the need of the hour, and at the same time he had to carry on his experiments with water-colour. There was no time to feel lonely and observe the gorgeous colours that lie scattered on the court-yard of life and nature. As an artist, Sushil not only wanted to paint himself, but also helped others to learn and know painting. He not only emerged as a significant artist in due course but also successfully shared the responsibilities of running the Ukil School of Art.

In 1945, in the International Contemporary Art Exhibition in New Delhi, he won a special prize for his lovely painting, "*Abhiman*" and in 1946, again in the Inter-Asian Art Exhibition in New Delhi, his painting, "*Manipuri Dancer*" won praise from O.C. Gangoly, Stella Kramrisch, Venkatachalam, and many other art critics of note. The same year his beautiful pencil drawing, "The *Dancer*" was exhibited in UNESCO Exhibition, in Paris and afterwards in India House London, so much liked and appreciated that it was presented by the Indian Government to the Chinese Government.

India embarked on the threshold of Independence in August 1947 and the National Flag was the pressing need of the day. Commissioned by K. M. Munshi and G.D. Birla Sushil executed a design of the National Flag. It was found to be the best and was adopted.

Sushil's murals are preserved in Bilaspur State and Birla Temple in New Delhi. His beautiful paintings have also found a steady demand and have found a place in the galleries of art collectors like Mr. G.D. Birla, Sir Bhag Chand Soni, Shri Kasturbhai Lalbhai, Kumar J. C. Sinha of Paikpara and others. A representative collection of his paintings can also be viewed at the Public Library at Mehrauli near the historic Qutab Minar. Foreign collectors, who availed themselves of the opportunity which the war afforded, readily purchased his works. Through them his paintings have found their way into America, England and many other countries.

Pencil drawing is a speciality with Sushil. The delicacy and finish of his lines is remarkable. His pencil sketches are not drawings, but pieces of poetry, with life and blood in them. They show his fine sensibility and his penetrating eye. The curves and cones and angles, in soft grey, do not lie still on the paper, but seem to stir and move. Sushil's other works were exhibited in the Royal Academy Exhibition, held in London in November this year. Such have been the exploits of Sushil lately. Early this year, in recognition of his valuable services, he was appointed the Principal of Sarada Ukil School of Art.

Sushil has a rhythmic approach to life. Rhythm is the harmony of "*Rupa*" and "*Gati*", the twin forces working at the basis of all that is living and beautiful. This is essentially a Hindu view of life and art, in as much as it holds that the portrayal or the interpretation of life may not be life-like or better say, art is not photography. Sushil's conception of rhythm can be traced in the curves and folds which make up quite a bit of his paintings. As for his sense of colour it is naive, delicate, and has a finis. In surface, that two dimensional media of painting, organised non-representational patterns give a direct aesthetic expression to the inner emotional and conative states of Indian mind. Consequently, like the Indian artist of yesterday, Sushil's art is non-representational in the sense that it expresses moods, though at times he interprets manners as well. The rhythm of life produces his moods, and

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his moods, create his paintings. In Sushil's paintings, there is no portrayal of life as we see or know. As such, some of us are liable to conclude that his art is away from life, existing in the ivory chambers of his imagination, where technicolour dreams and hallucinations dance round a bonfire of uncherished longings and repressed desires. But this would not be a sound verdict. As Edward Bullough points out, "nearness to life, that is too natural and immediate a response to things and thoughts, tends to destroy the artist's apprehension of reality: the physical distance between the artist and his environment is in essence on account of artistic objectivity not an escape from life." Today, contemporary artist goes down to the cellar and basement of the sub-conscious and the unconscious in search of the physical unity of humanity. But Sushil had no such pretensions To him, rhythm, the universal force of unity and harmony, uniting man and man, and man and matter, is the thing that counts. Humbly and modestly, he feels, observes and portrays rhythm.

Sushil is very fond of villages, and the rustic grandeur of rural life. In many of his paintings we find the *jat* women of the villages of the Delhi province with their multi-coloured 'ghagras' and 'dopattas' and graceful lithe figures. Whenever he gets a chance, he goes to the villages and enjoys the primitive pigments of the untainted landscape, with its throbbing vivacity, and ripe, lush and glowing colour.

The sixteen pictures reproduced here are fairly representative of the art of Sushil Sarkar. His '*Spring*' is a joyful representation of the much too brief, but delightful spring season of India in which he shows a young woman decorating the hair of her companion. Flowers have an important place in the coiffeure of women in India. The graceful curves of the women's bodies and the beautiful Har Singhar flowers with orange interiors scattered in the fore-ground contrasting with the jet-black colour of the women's hair make a pleasing study.

'*End of the Day*' stands out of the rest as a picture of unique type. Dark heavy thunder clouds encompassing a winding stream with two small figures in red in the distant horizon, produce a dream-like effect. In some ways this picture approaches the imaginative grandeur of Gaganendra Nath Tagore.

Out of this collection of pictures I consider '*Lotus*' as the most beautiful. The purple drapery of the lady of the lotus, the voluptuous curves of her body, her dreamy 'lotus' eyes, and her lithesome figure, her rich black long hair flowing down her shoulders shown against a light blue background make a very pleasing picture. It is an idealization of Indian womanhood, the daughters of the lotus land. The lotus flower in the fore-ground emerging out of a pool of water thrown in waves furnishes a pleasing contrast to the purple drapery of the lotus lady.

The "*Yellow Corn*' is typical of Sushil's rustic studies. The peasant carrying a sheaf of wheat with a spade on his shoulder, and his wife carrying two pitchers in the fore-ground, are fair representatives of the toiling humanity. The dark peasant is a symbol of masculine strength of a real son of the soil. Feminine beauty and rugged maleness paired together, make good composition.

The 'Peacock' with his gorgeously coloured plumes, is one of the most beautiful birds of India. When he spreads his tail in a fan-like manner displaying all the brilliantly coloured feathers, one can imagine no prouder male. A peacock feather represents "*Abhiman*" ("Pride"). A beautifully dressed young woman is often prouder than the peacock A proud young woman trampling a peacock feather under her feet represents the climax of pride. In this symbolic picture Sushil has distilled the essence of pride.

'*Misty Morning*' is composed in a rhythmic style. Two young girls carrying pitchers with the curved trunk of a tree in the fore-ground, and their 'dopattas' thrown in folds are typical of Sushil's rhythmic expression of Indian Life. The curves of folds, delicate colouring and simplicity of composition are shown at their best in this picture. '*Autumn Morning*' is a picture of the same type.

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'Meet my People' is another peasant study. In *'The Return'* are seen two peasant women fetching water. *'The Mother'* also belongs to the same class. In the *'First Grind'* we see the trials and tribulations of a young peasant bride.

'Shakuntala,' the heroine of Kalidasa has been beautifully portrayed by Sushil. The love-sick Shakuntala is shown clinging to the trunk of a weeping willow tree awaiting her lover. It is a gorgeous picture in traditional Indian style with a dream-like quality.

'The Dancer' represents a Manipuri girl in a dance pose. The richly embroidered costume of the dancer, and her poise and rhythm have been effectively portrayed.

'This Land is Mine' is a nice composition in dark greys. Here the daily life of the village people is exquisitely portrayed.

In 'Holi' we see a fine representation of the Radha-Krishna legend. The story of Krishna sprinkling coloured water on Radha, the milk maid, will continue to inspire young lovers. Sushil has successfully portrayed the coy milk-maid playfully resisting her divine lover. The gentle curves and sober colouring of this picture are fairly typical of Sushil's best artistic productions.

In *'The Yellow Veil'* is seen a pleasant contrast of blue and yellow. A girl carrying a pitcher of water is a common sight in an Indian village, and has furnished themes for painting to scores of painters. The grace and poise of an Indian girl carrying a pitcher of water has seldom been so beautifully portrayed as in this picture.

I have witnessed Sarkar's rapid progress. He lives in Delhi, but his heart is always in the countryside, where there is ample variety of subjects offered to the true artist. He understands and expresses the heart beats of his people with the unique intoxication of his brush.

Now that India has attained her long-awaited independence, there should be greater scope for artists of Sushil Sarkar's calibre. I am conscious of his fast-growing personality, and hope that he will continue to depict India and her humanity, in their various moods.

17, Rajpur Road,
Delhi.

M. S. RANDHAWA

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LIST OF PLATES

1 HOLI (COVER)
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8 MOTHER
9 MEET MY PEOPLE
10 THE RETURN
11 SHAKUNTALA
12 THE DANCER
13 AUTUMN MORNING
14 FIRST GRIND
15 THIS LAND IS MINE
16 THE YELLOW VEIL

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SPRING

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END OF THE DAY

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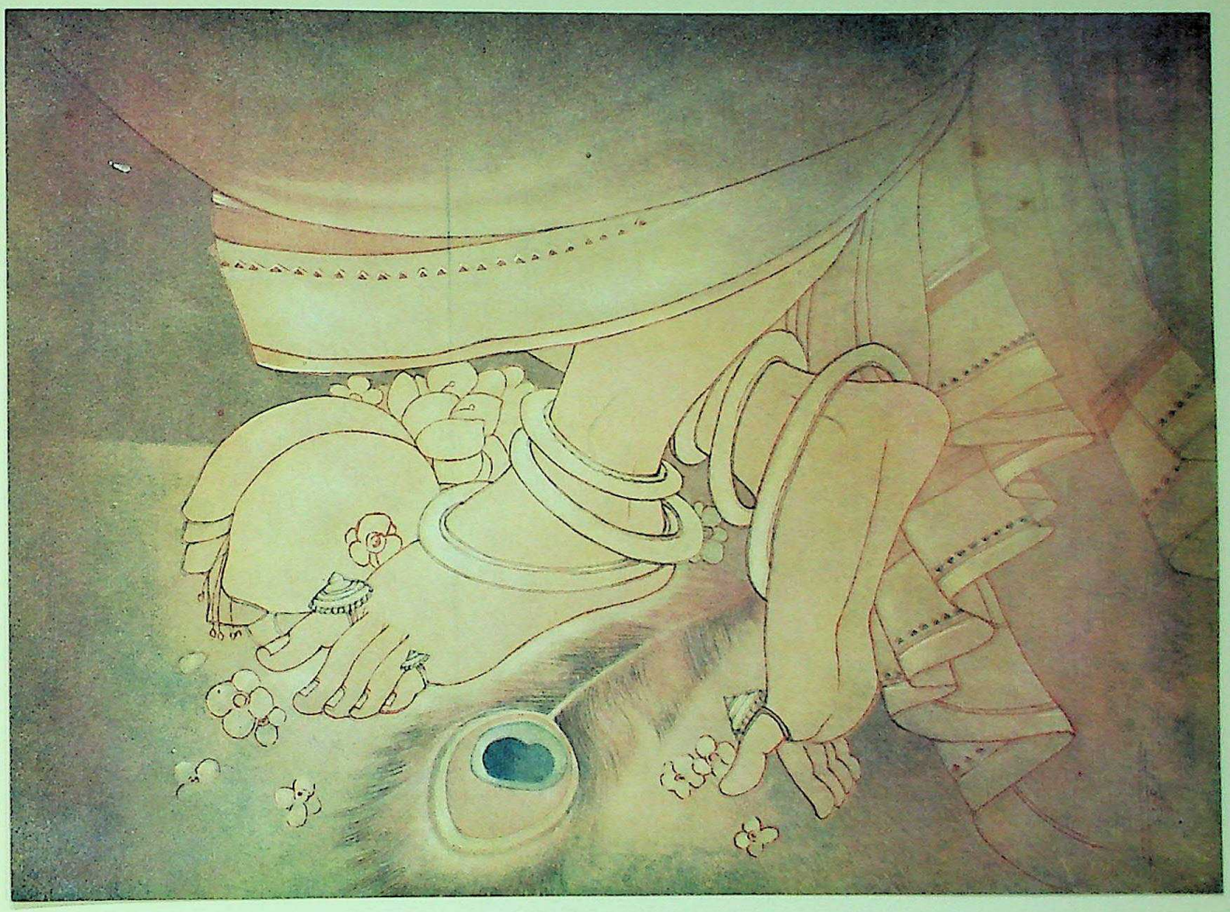

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MISTY MORNING

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MOTHER

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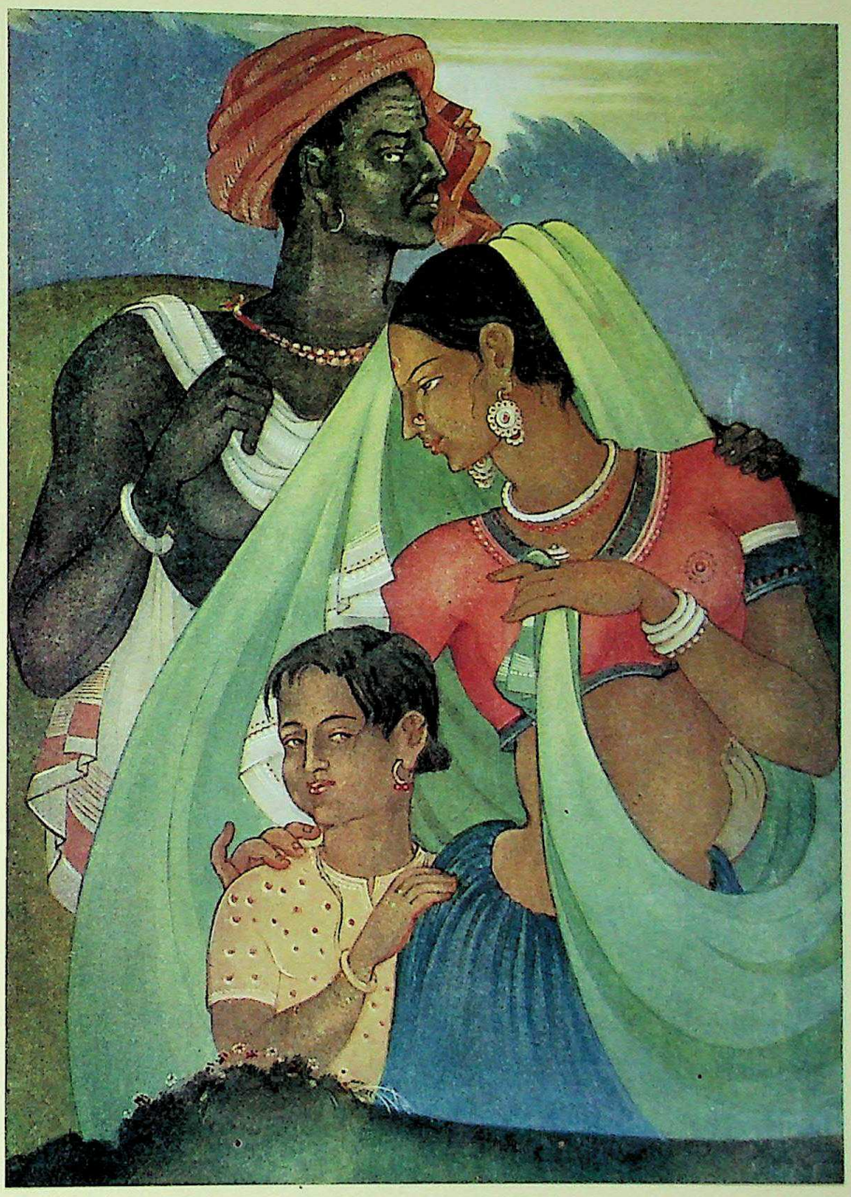

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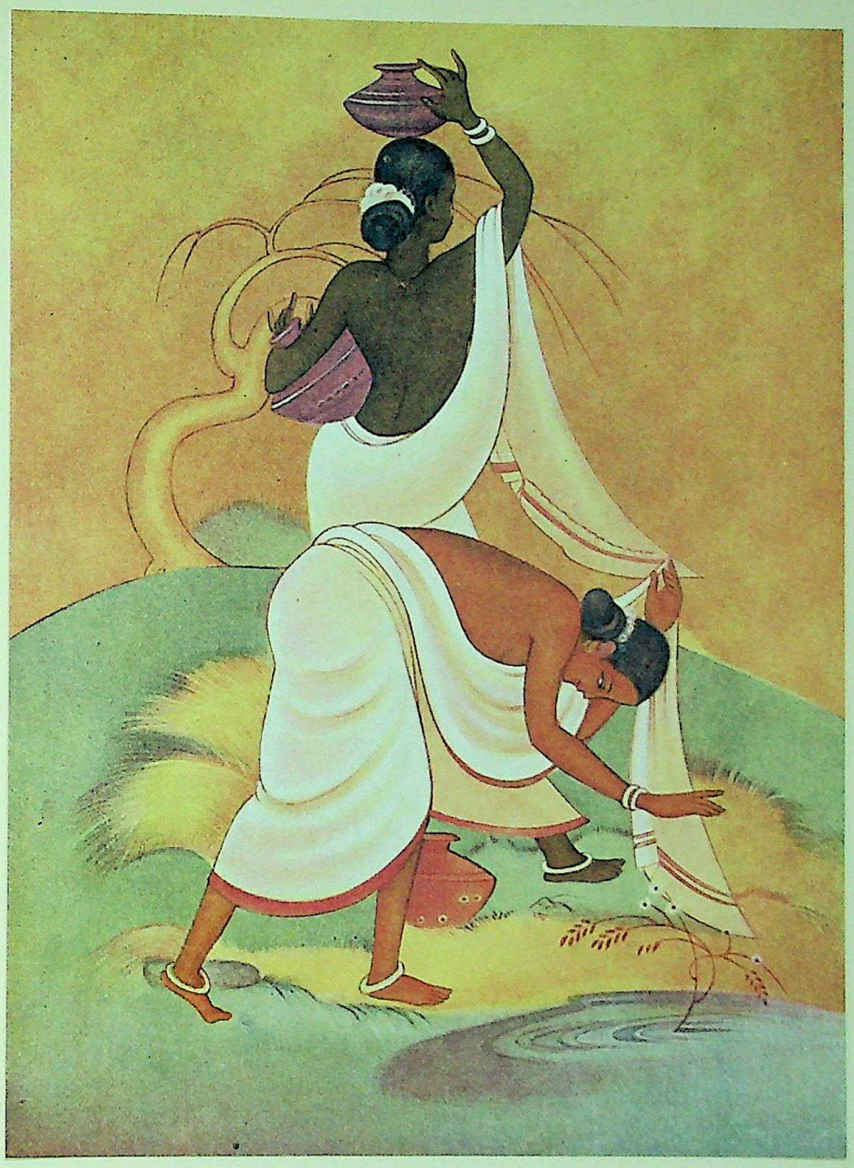

THE RETURN

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THE DANCER

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AUTUMN MORNING

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FIRST GRIND

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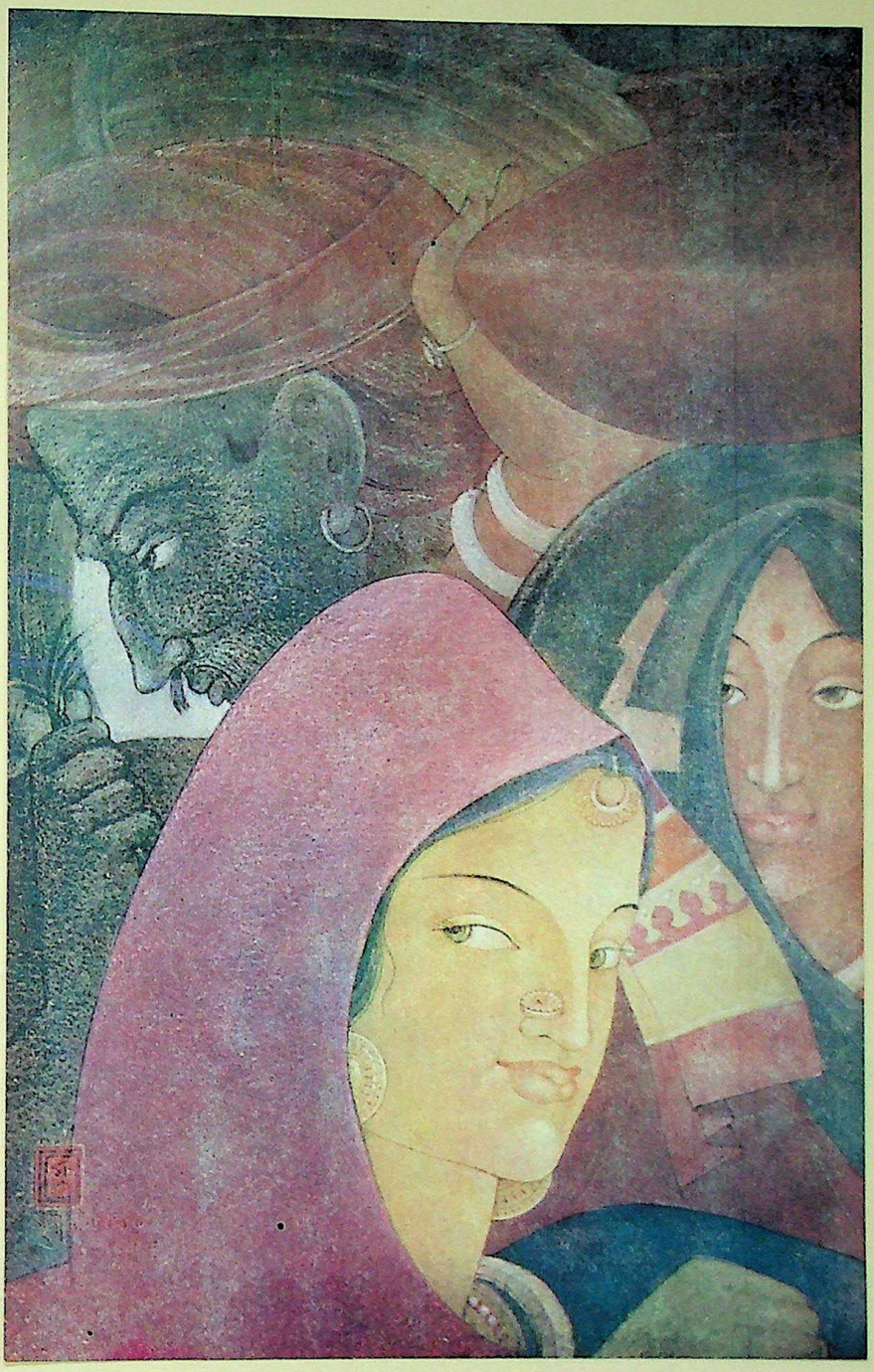

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